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THE WAR'S CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

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It is impossible to avoid thinking of war. It is just as difficult to avoid thinking of religion. What is the church to do in such a moment, mark time or advance, go heresy-hunting or minister to man's deepest needs? Wherein will the power of the church lie in the midst of war? That is no simple question, and the answer which is here given is one that merits careful consideration.

In the midst of this, the greatest conflict of the ages, we are beginning to discover that humanity is being reborn. The war is having a sobering effect upon the race as a whole. The world is beginning seriously to consider the effect that the war will have upon the social institutions. The war is trying many a noble institution with centuries of history back of it as with a refiner's fire. Whether these institutions will weather the stress and storm of these changing conditions it is difficult to say. But of this we are assured: that when the war is over and peace comes we shall find ourselves living in a new world, and we must be prepared to meet the new and changed conditions.

There is no social institution that is feeling so keenly the effects of the war as is the church. This is her testing time. She is on trial as never before, and it is not sufficient for men to turn away from the problem with the simple assurance "that the gates of Hades will not prevail against her." While we have that assurance in Scripture, there is no warrant for believing that she will not be forced to face critical times. Many are saying that if the church does not come out of the war purified and

purified the world will turn elsewhere. For the demand is for a church that will actually meet and solve the problems of life and not merely toy with them.

The church has been conscious of her imperfections and of her lack of response to the needs of the time, but yet has hesitated to move out. In fact, it is sometimes charged that the church is afraid of her own gospel, and that, if she dared preach it and endeavored to practice it, she would lose many of her so-called "respectable adherents." Some are even looking to socialism as the factor in establishing a new order based on Christ's teachings of love, good will, forgiveness, forgetfulness of self, the salvation of the world, and the placing of discipleship above nationalism. They seem to fear that after the war is over she will continue to give her attention to trivial and petty themes instead of touching the big things that affect life in all its relations. Some people seem to think that only a few scattered groups of prophetic souls will try to lead the world back to the Christ, which they say the world and the church have almost lost. Whether or not they are correct in their conclusions, there seems to be a unanimity of opinion that the church is in

danger of a setback from which it will take centuries to recover.

There seems to be a spirit of hatred that is filling the minds of Christians and non-Christians alike. The religious sense is being dulled, and spiritual perceptions are being forced into the background. It is a solemn time for the minister and for the church. We need to keep our eyes fixed upon God and to hear the gospel of love often. If the Christianity of Christians has failed, as we are being told, we can be sure that the Christianity of Christ will not fail. We need to rediscover the essential elements of his gospel and apply them to life. The church is being challenged along several lines by this conflict.

The war is challenging the church to change the motive of its appeal to men. In the past the religious appeals that have come to men have been largely selfish. Two rival institutions have been appealing to men for their loyalty during the past decades. And yet both have appealed to the lowest motive in man. Both have appealed to his self-interest. Socialism as well as Christianity has appealed to that motive. Socialism has offered to free man from the burden of toil and give him a high wage or, better still, a part of the profits which he has helped produce. Religion has appealed to the element of fear in man. The supreme motive for being religious was to escape eternal punishment, and the alignment with an institution or the submission to a rite simply freed man from the responsibilities of character-building. Appealing, as these institutions did, to the lowest elements in man, they got only enthusiasm and

numbers, but the life was spent in other directions.

Then came the war. It asked for men and it got them. But the war did not appeal to the element of fear or selfish interest, for it called men to give their lives as a supreme sacrifice for a noble purpose. It pictured trenches, artillery, blood, and death, but it got the men just the same. Someone will say that men are being forced to enlist but talk with men upon the street and they will tell you that they are ready to go when they are needed. The war is calling men to stand knee-deep in trenches of mud and blood; it is asking them to withstand the stifling acids and poisonous gases; it is asking them to bare their bodies to the hail of shell and fire, but it is getting the men, because it is appealing, not to their fears or self-interests, but to their willingness to sacrifice for a noble purpose.

The capacity to sacrifice and to suffer is the greatest capacity of human life. War does not pity man, nor does it plead with him, but it calls him and relies upon him for the sacrifice and the courage. Jesus appealed to the same motive in man. Jesus did not pity man, nor did he appeal to his fears, but he did appeal to the heroic element in him. "Take no thought for your life," he said; and, again, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The appeal of Jesus is best seen in Luke 9:51-62. Here he shows in the fifty-eighth verse that his call takes precedence over earthly comforts; in the next verse he shows that his call takes precedence over earthly relationships; and in the sixty-first verse he tells us that his call takes precedence

over earthly pleasures. Are not these the things that men cling to the longest and consider the most seriously when the call of Jesus comes to them? They are likewise the things that men hold most dear, but the things that are gladly given up when war calls. Again he says, "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it," and "And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life."

The calls of Jesus seem to be based largely upon the elements of heroism and sacrifice. In the past the appeals have been largely intellectual rather than ethical. If people have believed some things, they have been admitted to fellowship in the church, and the church has trusted that their lives were harmonized with their profession. Many good people whose lives morally have been above reproach, and often above those of many of the members of the church, have been shut out because they have questioned or refused to accept some doctrine which the clergy and membership have thought essential. Yet everybody who keeps in touch with the affairs of the church knows that a very large portion of the membership of the churches is made up of respectable adherents, and that there is no life in their professions.

The mass of men are longing for a faith that will bring them into touch with God. The clergy and churches seem to speak a strange language which belongs to a dead past. There seems to be an absence of plain speaking on the faith needed for a twentieth-century man.

They condemn twentieth-century sins and offer the remedies of past centuries for them. The atheists and agnostics speak plainly, and, instead of being met with an interpretation that answers their questions, their criticisms are evaded. Several years ago a prominent evangelist holding meetings in our town invited questions on any topic. The most noted atheist of the town handed in this question: "How do you justify a God of love and righteousness who would advise the children of Israel to borrow the gold and silver when they knew they were going to leave Egypt?" The answer was blunt and was as follows: "I do not have to justify him, for he is God, and whatsoever he does is all right." Then he launched into a discourse on the narrowness of the individual who would ask such a question. But the atheist bragged throughout the city that his opinions of the church and clergy were confirmed. They were afraid of him and of any man of intelligence. How that evangelist might have led this man intelligently to study God's ways and have constructively helped him is evident to all.

Talk with the man on the street or in the shop, and he will tell you that he has faith in God, but has not united with the church because it still clings to wornout statements of religion which he cannot accept. He would like to accept them, but they are so repugnant to his intelligence that he cannot.

Now that the war is upon us note the themes being discussed in many pulpits: "The End of the World," "Why Doesn't God Stop the War?" "Is Wilhelm the Number 666 in Revelation?" "The

War as a Punishment for Our Sins." And the sins referred to are often the refusal to attend church and attendance at the moving-picture theater. What men are wanting is an interpretation of this great war in terms of life. People are seriously thinking these days and are trying to reconcile their faith with facts. Instead of such topics as these the clergy needs to interpret the times in such a way as to make reason and passion one. Our definitions need to be freed from the litter and dust of the past, and the appeals must be directed to the life and intelligence of the whole man in his present circumstances, instead of dealing with outgrown and archaic questions. I quote from a recent article in the *London Times*:

In every age the human mind taints its beliefs with its own peculiar follies and egotisms; and if those beliefs are to live they must be continually cleansed by posterity. The time of cleansing for the Christian theology has been delayed so long that there is danger lest the mass of men should think it all litter and dust of the past. This danger the churches have not understood. They have believed that they could stave it off by mere adjustment, and by slow, reluctant relinquishing of this or that belief, as it became impossible. What is needed is not a mere adjustment or abandonment, but discovery and growth, not diplomacy and compromise, but the belief that there is a wonderful truth still to be discovered and faith in the scent for that truth. The problem for the church now is to open itself to the rising intelligence of the country, so that it may pour in and quicken it; but if this is to happen the intelligence of the church itself must rise, and it must not be content any longer to talk pious non-sense, in the hope that it will seem sense because it is pious.

Will not the men who have been up against the hard life of the trenches, men who have faced death and in that hour found their faith in God budding into a reality, or who have found him in their hours of loneliness and meditation—will not these men insist upon the reality of things religious and spurn all the shams and veneer of our modern religious life when they come home again? Can we hope to appeal to the fear of men who have not known fear or who have had it crushed out in the battle line? Can we hope to appeal to the self-interests of men who have given themselves as a sacrifice in the hour of need? Shall we not be forced back to the simple appeals of Jesus along the lines of sacrifice, devotion, and service, not only to the Christ, but to the world as well? In other words, must not the appeal of Christianity be changed from an intellectual belief in the doctrines of the church to that of a life dedicated to the service of Christ—a life kept ever fresh by prayer, worship, and Scripture reading?

The war is challenging the church to a new birth of faith in the recovering of its lost passion. The man in the street knows little about the history of the church, and in fact he cares but little about it. He does not care anything about creeds or doctrines, and he often insists that our so-called mysticism is but a coward's escape from the real world of fact. However, he is an apt hearer of the message of truth if it is charged with the passion of a mighty conviction and deals with the problems that beset his own life and the life about him.

The church has never had so much organization and equipment, but any

observer is conscious of the fact that there is a died-down feeling in many of the churches that is pathetic. Even a large part of the membership are not enlisted and seem to care but little for the church or its future. They are members of the church and wish to be counted, but their influence is away from the church almost entirely. The church is conscious of this lack and has tried to substitute other things for it. Often the emphasis has been placed upon organization, creeds, and ritual with the hope that the power needed will be recovered. Sometimes a wave of emotionalism has given hope that the passion of the early days is about to be recovered, only to have the hope blasted when the emotion has been withered. An evangelism born of a mighty passion has always swept everything before it. This is fully attested by the rapid advance of the church in the first century. They lacked a great many things then that we now have in abundance, but they had a passion that we cannot parallel.

Later this passion was submerged by a wave of controversy and disputation. Creeds multiplied, and orthodoxy was defined, and the energy that might have been used in the regeneration of the world was spent in definition and debate. The church was in a desperate condition, but the Reformation once more unloosed the dynamical passion of the church, and a new and vigorous evangelism began its operations. Out of this stress came modern Protestantism. But the church has slowed up again and now we are seeking ways of recovering that which seems to have been lost. The era of modern missions has partly brought back that passion, but the

church today needs something that will unloose all the latent energy of its membership and cause it to be directed against the sins of the present time.

The men who criticise the church are often its best friends and not bitter and irreverent critics. What they desire is that the church may take its rightful place after the war and proclaim a living message with prophetic power. What they fear is that the church may lose her chance of proclaiming that message then, because she has not dared face the full meaning of her problems now. They believe that the church will have to be directed and propelled by a mighty passion when the war is over in order to attract and hold the hearts and minds of men. Such problems as agnosticism, Christology, miracles, Eucharist, second coming, prophecy, sacraments, and holy days will not appeal to men then, but the church must be able to give the world an explanation of what has happened and put before it a strong Christian policy based upon a new birth of faith in the church of the living Christ.

Will she rise to the sublime heights of leadership and with the passion and power of the apostolic and reformation times declare the whole gospel of Christ regardless of governments, powers, and men? If she does not, she will not be able to hold those who come back from the trenches, and if she does, the promised Kingdom will have become a sure thing. Christianity is powerful enough to save the nations, but it must be preached in all of its fulness and power. Christianity cannot survive in a world with unsocial and anti-Christian forces at work. One or the other must go, and

the church must draw to itself those who are willing to be governed by the ethics of Jesus and move on the forces of unrighteousness with the same energy with which the armies have moved against each other. Ecclesiastical procedure, loyalty to traditions, and nicety of definition will no longer satisfy a world that has passed through a baptism of fire and come out with the dross and impurities purged away. But the church, also baptized and purified, will be able to insist on the reign of God on the earth and a just and Christian social order and to make the service of the common good the best way of realizing a man's best self.

As a third proposition let us consider: *The war is challenging either a union of the denominations or the breaking down of the denominational lines and a better co-operation among them and the elimination of many of the smaller cults and sects.* The world is going to know how to get along better after the world war is over. The co-operation of nations will not only produce a greater respect for each other, but will bring them into a closer fellowship. The tie of comradeship is surpassed only by family ties, and the men of the nations are being brought into the circle of comradeship. The nations are learning to work together for a common purpose. The Spanish-American War brought about a better feeling between the northern and the southern states simply because the sons of these states mingled with each other and learned to respect each other's views and powers. Men who fight together, weep together, and share the discomforts of army life never cease to respect each other. Topics of all sorts are discussed

in the tents, and common views are promulgated. This tie is lasting. I had the privilege of bringing two Civil War veterans together who had not seen each other for thirty-five years. They talked over for days the things that had made them comrades.

Out yonder men are not shying at each other because of denominational lines. Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and those of no profession are living together, fighting together, and dying together. The thing that stamps a man as genuine is not his profession, but his life, and men are respected if they are genuine, and all frauds are quickly placarded. These men are being brought together in their religious life. Do we not read of Catholic and Protestant chaplains working side by side or dividing up the work? Have you read the statements of these officers relative to their respect for each other and of a belief of a closer relationship after the war? It does not seem possible that these men will return to their homes as sectarians, but as Christians in the largest sense possible.

Let us be quite frank about this matter and look at it in the light of present-day movements and facts. All the talks of church union have been along the lines of doctrine or of economic necessity. We have been tied to our creeds and presuppositions so closely that we have hardly dared think that union of the churches could really come about. It is quite possible, it seems to me, that what needs to be done, and what men have refused to do, God is going to do through this war. Unless the narrowness of sectarianism goes, another fellowship of some sort broad enough for all whose lives are patterned

after Christ's pattern, but who may not be exact or dogmatic in their statements, will come. How I do not know, but it will come. We do not for a moment think that the church is going to pass away, but she will have to cast aside the grave-clothes of conservatism and ecclesiasticism and return once more to the important facts of life and the vital facts of the gospel of Jesus, or God will raise up another people to carry out his will.

That this is not beyond the range of possibility is attested by the facts of history. The Catholic church had drifted away from the simple teachings of Christ and had turned its attention to other things, and the Reformation came in to deprive it of its hold on life, and Protestantism sprang up. The primitive Baptists were once a virile and growing people, but they rejected the idea of world-wide missions on the ground of their theology, and today there are scarcely a hundred thousand of them, scattered mostly among the hills of the Southland. We have all seen local congregations swept away because they had no vision and did not touch the life of the community in which they were situated.

May it not be that what men have refused to do God will do even amid the stress and conflict of the present day? If those who have named the name of Christ have refused to come together into one brotherhood, may it not be possible that God is going to take the mat-

ter into his own hands and bring about a new order in which there is not Catholic or Jew or Protestant—"where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free, but where Christ is all and in all"? Loving the same Father, obeying the same Christ, respecting and trusting one another, living side by side, the men of the world are calling for unity and co-operation along all lines, and the churches will be compelled by circumstances to come into a closer fellowship and break down many of the imaginary lines that keep the denominations apart.

The following quotation from a sermon by Dr. Watkinson seems to fit the need of the hour:

Brethren, the best of everything is before you. Do not believe the world is near its end; it is just coming to a decent beginning. We have hardly yet shaken the mud from us. The best things today are barbarisms. The moon sets behind us, but the sun rises before us. New literature, better manners, milder laws, a vaster unity, abundance, brotherhood, peace, glory to God in the highest, good will towards men—all are coming, fast coming. The world began with a paradise, and it shall end with one. The first perished; but of the second it is written that her sun shall no more go down, neither shall the moon withdraw its shining. Get this paradise into your own heart: and then see to it that Christ's Church today becomes a close foreshadowing of the coming glory and gladness.